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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 5636
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000665

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS; NSC FOR PHU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAIS UNENTHUSIASTICALLY ELECT HALF A SENATE

REF: A. BANGKOK 633 (SENATOR SELECTIONS)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 84 (SENATE SELECTION BEGINS)

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Thais returned to the polls on March 2 to elect 76 Senators in the 150-seat upper house of Parliament in elections that saw a lower-than-expected voter turnout. A high-profile committee had earlier selected the other 74 Senators. Thailand's Election Commission (ECT) blamed voter apathy for the low turnout. A prominent NGO activist won the highly-contested race in Bangkok, possibly indicating the capital's voters hoped to elect someone to check the influence of the People's Power Party-dominated lower house. Some politically-connected and other high-profile individuals won less contested races in other provinces in an ostensibly non-partisan election campaign. The ECT said it had received 55 election-related complaints, 16 of them serious, and hoped to complete investigations and certify the election results within seven days. Although additional fraud allegations may still surface, the elections appear to have been free and fair. It remains to be seen, however, whether the new Senate will remain independent and how it will interact with the fully-elected lower house of Parliament. End summary.

THAI ELECTION REDUX

[1](#)2. (SBU) Following the February 19 selection of 74 Senators to the 150-seat upper house of Parliament based on the recommendation of a high-profile committee (ref A), Thais returned to the polls on March 2 to elect the remaining 76 Senators. Each elected Senator will represent one of the country's 76 provinces for a six-year term. After the polls closed, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) announced that 55.9% of the electorate had voted, a figure dramatically lower than the 74.5% turnout in the December 23 elections for the lower house of Parliament. Turnout was exceptionally sluggish in Bangkok, where only approximately 40% of

registered voters cast ballots. The ECT blamed the low turnout on an electorate "bored" with politics, and at least one ECT official reportedly faulted Senate candidates for failing to mobilize a high turnout. (Comment: Strict election laws dramatically circumscribed the ability of candidates to campaign for elected Senate seats; blaming Senate candidates for the low turnout may strike many as unfair. End comment.)

13. (SBU) Out of the 487 candidates running nationwide, 35 competed for the single, high-profile Senate seat in Bangkok.

On March 2, the ECT released unofficial results indicating that prominent consumer rights and anti-corruption advocate (and close Embassy contact) Rosana Tositrakul won a landslide victory with nearly 50% of the vote in the capital. Senate contests in other provinces were not as highly contested. In Phang Nga province, for example, one candidate ran unopposed.

10 Senators-elect are women, while 25 are individuals who lost their Senate positions following the September 2006 coup d'etat.

A NON-PARTISAN SENATE?

14. (SBU) The Senate elections are ostensibly non-partisan, as registered political party members are disqualified from being Senators, as are relatives of elected representatives. Nevertheless, pundits felt that some Senators-elect (possibly as many as 40 of the 76 elected Senators) benefited from the support of or were otherwise tied to prominent political figures. Other observers felt that name recognition played a large role in a generally low-key election campaign. In Chantaburi, the Senator-elect is the husband of a prominent local government official who is seen as close to the governing People's Power Party (PPP). In Ayuthaya, voters elected the scion of a prominent political family. In many other provinces, prominent business leaders and individuals

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connected in some way to famous politicians won their respective contests. One prominent human rights activist told us on March 3 that he believed only Bangkok Senator-elect Rosana and Pattani Senator-elect Worawit Baru, a former National Reconciliation Commissioner, would not be beholden to vested political interests in the new Senate.

MOSTLY FREE AND FAIR

15. (SBU) In Narathiwat Province, suspected insurgents reportedly detonated a roadside bomb which injured five government officials who were inspecting nearby polling stations. Elsewhere in the country, there were relatively few problems or allegations of voter fraud. On March 3, an ECT official told us that 55 election-related complaints, including some relating to vote-buying, had been filed thus far. The ECT considered 16 of them serious enough to merit further scrutiny by ECT investigatory panels. The official indicated that the ECT would likely endorse election winners in complaint-free constituencies by March 5. The ECT hoped to complete the pending investigations and officially certify all election winners by March 10.

16. (C) Comment: Vote-buying has been a problem in previous Senate elections and additional fraud allegations may still surface. Thus far, it appears that the government administered the elections capably and that the electorate has accepted the results. We will continue to urge Thai officials to fairly investigate all allegations of vote fraud and vote buying. On the whole, however, the elections appear to have been free and fair, and the outcome seems to reflect the genuine will of the Thai people.

17. (C) Comment continued: The decision to select 74 of the 150 Senators remains highly controversial. (Note: Prior to the promulgation of the 1997 constitution, all Thai Senators

were appointed. End note.) Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, for example, recently indicated publicly he felt the country should revert to a fully-elected Senate. The landslide election of prominent activist Rosana in Bangkok indicates that many Thai voters, at least in the capital, hope the Senate will be an effective check on the power of the fully-elected lower house of Parliament. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the new Senate will be as independent as the country's constitution drafters envisioned and whether it can remain free of partisan influence.

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